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**The Guarantee of Freedom and Dignity? Colombian Land Reform, the Alliance for
Progress, and the United States**

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I. Introduction

“American policy cannot ignore the grave defects and dangers which exist in the basic structure of Latin American nations. What we can do is to help create the conditions in which effective reform can take place and to give encouragement and support to those leaders who have the will to institute reforms.”¹ In December 1960, a Foreign Policy Clearing House committee made what at first seems like a fairly innocuous recommendation for the Latin American policy of the incoming Kennedy administration. The paper advocated the establishment of an international body which could pressure Latin American nation into enacting national programs of land reform. A glance at the signatories to the recommendation, however, reveals a few odd bed-fellows. Along with leading development economists such as Albert Hirschman and Walt Rostow, those recommending land reform in this policy paper included United Fruit and other multinational firms. United Fruit Company seems an especially unlikely advocate of land reform, given its active role only seven years earlier in the overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala because of his daring land reform. This seemingly out of place endorsement can be seen as a harbinger of the surprising U.S. foreign policy of advocating for Latin American land reform.

In the early 1960s, agrarian reform in Latin America rapidly became critically important in both American foreign policy and domestic reform movements across the Western hemisphere. During this “Era of Rising Expectations,” many Latin Americans challenged what had become the status quo in the region. Across the hemisphere, average citizens called for universal access to primary education, reduced infant mortality, better health care, and an end to

¹ “Alliance for Progress: A Program of Inter-American Partnership” (Foreign Policy Clearing House, December 19, 1960), Jack N. Behrman Personal Papers, Box 001, Folder 19, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

unjust taxation and land tenure laws. After decades of supposed neglect and very obvious support for dictators, the Kennedy Administration offered a “new, hard look”² at Latin America as a region, which encouraged this wave of optimism for the future. This reversal of American foreign policy was not a magnanimous change of heart, but instead an explicit reaction to the success of the Cuban Revolution at the end of Eisenhower’s presidency. This backdrop of potential Communist footholds emerging across Latin America in Cuban-styled revolutions provided the impetus for American actors such from Kennedy to United Fruit to reconsider American influence in the region. The reevaluation of foreign policy Kennedy called for resulted in the Alliance for Progress, a hemispheric commitment to improving the position of the common Latin American man both socially and economically. The United States would loan funds for reform projects undertaken in the region while requiring well-defined plans for national development before disbursement. In Colombia, the fledgling National Front government conceived exactly such a plan at a National Agrarian Council in August 1960. This law of social and agrarian reform would enable the elimination of the inequities and inefficiencies found in Colombian agriculture, from unused public lands (baldios), to underutilized large estates (latifundia), to the overcrowded smallholdings (minifundia). But while American politicians frequently described the rising expectations of the average Latin American, the progressive Law 135 had to overcome fierce resistance before President Lleras Camargo signed it into effect in late 1961.

The debates leading to the adoption of Colombian Law 135 present valuable insight into Latin American-United States relations in the early 1960's. Colombia is perhaps the best Latin

²James S. Bradshaw, “Kennedy-Interpretive,” (December 16, 1960), James S. Bradshaw Personal Papers, Box 001, Folder 4, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

American country to examine when looking into this relationship, because it offered the greatest chance of enacting a successful land reform. As a survey of the Alliance for Progress after eight years noted, Lleras Camargo was the quintessential Latin American leader who was both anti-Castro and reform-minded.³ Additionally, Lleras Camargo developed a close relationship with the United States during the Gustavo Rojas Pinilla era from 1948-1954 when he served as the first Secretary General of the Organization of American States. This constant exposure to American politicians made him more open to American development strategy than other Latin American leaders. During this same period, the rural violence known as La Violencia clearly signaled that reforms were needed in Colombia, and resistance to reforms by the political elite might produce explosive reactions from the peasantry. Arriving in power after Rojas Pinilla was overthrown, the National Front coalition government stabilized the country after civil war, creating a political environment more suitable for a successful land reform program. One reason the country was more receptive to land reform under the National Front was La Violencia and the Rojas Pinilla administration had weakened and divided the traditional land owning class to the point where reform could actually be discussed as a policy goal. An American survey team also specifically remarked on the “stable if somewhat austere” conditions of both the Colombian government and economy.⁴ Although true political stability would require further pacification of the peasantry, the National Front provided a strong base to enforce policies across the country. These same studies noted that the economic and social problems that Colombia faced, such as land reform, did not appear insurmountable and could be impacted by large amounts of American aid. Colombia could serve as a symbolic and idealistic victory for the Alliance for

³ “Survey of the Alliance for Progress- Colombia: A Case History of U.S. Aid” (Committee on Foreign Relations, February 1, 1969), http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pcaac189.pdf. 673.

⁴ Byron C. Denny, Gerard F. Horne, and Wayne H. Miles, *A Colonization and Land Utilization Program for Colombia* (Bogota, Colombia: STACA, 1960). 1.

Progress in a way that most other Latin American nations could not, especially given the brutal violence of the past decade.⁵ Being the crown jewel of the Alliance makes Colombia the ideal scenario for land reform to be accomplished, making a case study of the country important. If a country that received significant amounts of attention and aid specifically to be shown off to the rest of the world could not achieve its initial land reform goals, that would not speak well for the chances of success of other nations.

Another major reason why it is beneficial to examine the case of Colombia is the country's extensive history with unrealized land reform programs. As a former colony of the Spanish Empire, Colombia inherited, among other cultural relics, the latifundia by direct means of capitulations by the Spanish royalty. After these large estates in prime agricultural land were gifted, the rural poor traveled to the less fertile Cordillera region of the country and there settled much smaller, less productive farms known as minifundia. Very little changed from independence until the 1930's, although there were a few large land possession shifts that tended to strengthen the position of large landholders. The requisitioning by the government of Church lands,⁶ some large scale colonization efforts and the introduction of coffee are notable exceptions to the 1800 status quo, but all tended to favor the latifundists. The election of Alfonso Lopez Pumarejo to the presidency shattered this stagnation with his "Revolución en Marcha" which sought to solve the various agrarian problems that the country had been facing. In Law 200, Alfonso Lopez tackled issues such as vaguely defined property rights, peasant land invasions, and the class conflict that resulted in events such as the massacre of striking United Fruit Company banana workers. For the next 20 years however, the Law accomplished limited

⁵ Jeffrey F. Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America* (New York City: Routledge, 2007). 154-156.

⁶ Ernest A. Duff, *Agrarian Reform in Colombia* (New York City: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968). 7.

practical reform, mostly due to political, and later physical, warfare between the Conservative and Liberal parties. While it did succeed in improving the conditions of the peasantry, the government behind Law 200 and Law 100, which Congress introduced in 1944, lacked the driving enthusiasm for expropriation that an effective bill would need. One further decree given by the military junta in charge of Colombia immediately prior to the National Front attempted to increase agricultural production, with limited success. Prior to the ascension of the National Front, no reforms truly followed through on creating a significant countrywide change. Yet there was a genuine interest in solving the agrarian question, making Colombia the ideal nation to finally enact a meaningful land reform in the Alliance for Progress era.

Colombia was not alone in having previous experience with land reform. The United States had practice in enacting land reform programs since the end of World War II. In both post-war Germany and Japan, American occupiers saw land reform as a way to “decartelize” the agricultural bases of those countries and prevent any reassertions of prewar power.⁷ Similar programs under the United States Army Military Government in Korea and separately in the Philippines further reinforced the image of a United States which supported limited land reform. The United States homegrown land reform acts such as the Homestead Act of 1862 and the Dawes Act certainly also put a positive spin on such programs for U.S. politicians.

The object of this paper is to find how these two distinct debates came together and put them in the larger context of the Latin American-U.S. relationship. First, I will prove that the United States decided that encouraging Latin American nations to enact programs of land reform was a worthwhile policy goal. This will then lead into the case study of Colombia, where the extent of

⁷ John D. Montgomery, “United States Advocacy of International Land Reform,” in *International Dimensions of Land Reform* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 115–47. 116-117.

U.S. influence will be examined in the debates prior to the signing of Law 135. I will show that although the United States successfully nudged Colombia towards drafting a land reform bill, ultimately the bill passed less because of Colombian desire for radical reform than because of a need to maintain internal political stability. The newly minted National Front coalition of moderate Liberals and Conservatives needed a major policy to legitimate their political power. Since the chosen policy was land reform, the passage of Law 135 of 1961 truly relied on the support of moderate Ospinista faction within the Conservative Party.

II. The United States

Prior to the passage of Colombian Law 135 in December 1961, many influential figures in the United States spoke in favor of a more equitable and efficient land tenure system throughout Latin America. As early as December 1959, high ranking American politicians such as presidential candidate Senator Hubert Humphrey called for improved relations with Latin American nations. Senator Humphrey's nine point plan for recreating friendly ties to the American republics fell short of calling for outright land reform, but did acknowledge that many Latin Americans "want an end to semi-feudal conditions in which 5 percent of the population owns 80-90 percent of the land."⁸ Although some modern historians and development economists argue that the term semi-feudal ignores many subtle changes since the 1800s, for many Americans using this emotionally charged term showed deep-seated concern for the status of Latin Americans.⁹ After Kennedy's victory in the 1960 presidential election, public calls by American politicians for redistribution of land occurred significantly more frequently. On March

⁸ Hubert H. Humphrey, "Nine-Point Program Proposed by Senator Humphrey for Improving Latin American Relations," April 4, 1959, James S. Bradshaw Personal Papers, Box 001, Folder 4, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

⁹ James William Park, *Latin American Underdevelopment: A History of Perspectives in the United States 1870-1965* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).205.

13, 1961, at a White House reception for Senators and Latin American diplomats, Kennedy pledged \$500 million towards “fulfilling the Act of Bogota” by attacking, among other things, archaic land tenure structures.¹⁰ This would be one of many speeches by Kennedy to rally support for his ultimate goal, the Alliance for Progress.

“There is no place in democratic life for institutions which benefit the few while denying the needs of the many,” Kennedy declared, “even though the elimination of such institutions may require far-reaching and difficult changes such as land reform.”¹¹ By the time of his declaration before the seminal Organization of American States meeting in Punta del Este, Uruguay, U.S. President John F. Kennedy announced that the United States would make an unprecedented commitment to Latin America to combat undemocratic institutions such as unequal land distribution. Kennedy, like many Americans, almost certainly believed in the yeoman farmer as the basis of a strong democracy following a tradition that stems from Thomas Jefferson.¹² Building upon the President’s message at the same conference, Secretary of Treasury C. Douglas Dillon formally announced U.S. backing for “a task force on land reform... [that] could recommend the measures required to bring about the great increase in agricultural productivity which we must have, while at the same time assuring that the benefits of this productivity are available to all who work the land. This may often mean not only the settlement of public lands but also redistribution of underused latifundia.”¹³ Up until Dillon, very few Americans called for

¹⁰ John F. Kennedy, “Address of the President at a White House Reception for Latin American Diplomats, Members of Congress and Their Wives, East Room,” March 13, 1961, Richard N. Goodwin Personal Papers, Box 001, Folder 8, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

¹¹ “Alliance for Progress, a Program for the Peoples of the Americas,” August 1961, Teodoro Moscoso Personal Papers, Box 002, Folder 02, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

¹² Joseph S Nye, Jr., “Ethical Dimensions of International Involvement in Land Reform,” in *International Dimensions of Land Reform* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984). 15.

¹³ “Alliance for Progress, a Program for the Peoples of the Americas,” August 1961

outright expropriation of privately held lands, preferring to stick to generalized statements about distribution of the land. This marked a new direction for American policy suggestions in the region and certainly used both equity and agricultural efficiency as motivators for reform. In these and other international speeches, many high profile American politicians made earnest calls for radical land reform.

What did the United States hope to achieve by promoting land reform abroad: equity or efficiency? In the official statements broadcast by Kennedy and the high-ranking American diplomats in 1960-1961, equity was certainly a focal point. As signatories to the Charter of Punta del Este, the United States affirmed that one of the objectives of the Alliance for Progress was “6. To encourage, in accordance with the characteristics of each country, programs of comprehensive agrarian reform leading to the effective transformation, where required, of unjust structures and systems of land tenure and use, with a view to replacing latifundia and dwarf holdings by an equitable system of land tenure”¹⁴ American speeches prominently featured allusions to equity, redistribution, and rapid structural change. However, beneath the rosy, idyllic evocations of equality between the campesinos and the latifundists lay the true motive of achieving economic efficiency. These two goals were not mutually exclusive and, in fact, the Kennedy administration included both supporters of land reform based on equity and those based on efficiency. As early as the beginning of 1962, however, the congressional voices opposing the redistributionist policy of the Kennedy administration became more powerful. In fact, some congressional voices on the Subcommittee on Inter-American Economic Relations of the Joint Economic Committee began “echoing the traditional landowners’ elitist mistrust of the common

¹⁴ “The Charter of Punta Del Este, Establishing an Alliance for Progress Within the Framework of Operation Pan America,” August 17, 1961, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/intam16.asp.

man [and] spoke of the danger of the ‘illiterate or semiliterate cropper.’”¹⁵ A desire to focus on simply increasing agricultural productivity accompanied this fear of the more equity-driven policy that Kennedy sought. Those in favor of a more gradual land reform to increase efficiency would eventually steer the United States policy towards using redistribution as a means to achieve increased economic efficiency rather than a solution to a social issue.¹⁶ Therefore, the U.S.’s promotion of land reform aimed at increased efficiency, although it definitely used the rhetoric of equity.

While it is tempting to dismiss the statements made by the upper echelon of American politicians as simply rhetoric seeking to capitalize on Latin American sentiments about the unequal distribution of land, the ideas and economic theories discussed in less public conversations point to a serious attempt by the United States to craft a successful land reform in Latin America. Published by the Research and Policy Committee of the Committee for Economic Development, “Cooperation for Progress in Latin America” reveals that even in the lower level, more policy-driven think tanks of Washington, land reform was being seriously proposed as a solution to the long-term land tenure problems facing Latin America. If even an influential policy organization run by leading business executives supported land reform and stated that “nothing could do more to increase the stake of the common man in his society and in the economic development of his country,”¹⁷ then some version of land reform was a serious U.S. policy goal.

¹⁵ James F. Petras and Robert LaPorte, Jr., *Cultivating Revolution: The United States and Agrarian Reform in Latin America* (New York City: Random House, 1971). 383.

¹⁶ Petras and LaPorte, Jr., *Cultivating Revolution*, 396.

¹⁷ “Cooperation for Progress in Latin America,” April 1961, Teodoro Moscoso Personal Papers, Box 007, Folder 003, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

Personal advisers to the Kennedy administration also argued in favor of land tenure reform in Latin America. Assistant Secretary of State Chester Bowles wrote in a private telegram to Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and George Ball that since what the United States was asking for in Latin America was no less than a social and economic revolution, it was imperative that the U.S. maintain pressure on the Latin American countries in support of equitable and efficient land reform.¹⁸ He continued that the United States would probably be attacked by those who have vested interests in maintain the status quo, but the potential benefits in terms of economic development and resisting a Castro-style seizure of land far outweigh the anti-American sentiment that might arise in large land owners. In March 1961, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. also established himself as a firm advocate for land reform in a report on the state of the Latin American republics. Schlesinger agreed with Bowles that pressuring Latin American nations into land tenure reform would equate to a “middle class revolution,” but held this was infinitely superior to a “workers-and-peasants’ (i.e., Communist or Peronista) revolution” which would inevitably occur within the decade if nothing were done.¹⁹ Schlesinger insisted that the only way to prevent a lower class revolution was to establish the United States as firmly anti-dictator and promote those governments which are likely to support land, tax, and social reforms. Adlai Stevenson, then the United States’ representative at the United Nations, also returned from a Latin American tour with a view in favor of promoting land reform across the Americas. In a report to President Kennedy on the findings of his tour, Stevenson wrote that some nations, notably Peru, believed that the Alliance for Progress would simply represent an “aid ‘melon’” to

¹⁸ Chester Bowles, “Telegram, Chester Bowles to President, Secretary, Ball and Hamilton,” October 20, 1961, Richard N. Goodwin Personal Papers, Box 001, Folder 8, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

¹⁹ Edward C. Keefer et al., eds., “Memorandum From the President’s Special Assistant (Schlesinger) to President Kennedy,” FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1961–1963 VOLUME XII, AMERICAN REPUBLICS, March 10, 1961.

be divided up. Stevenson was disappointed that even though all the dignitaries he had spoken to invoked land and social reforms, many did not take the necessity for self-help measures seriously, implying that the U.S. needed to make clear it was in earnest.²⁰ At the policy creation level, it is clear that many politicians believed that the U.S. should be actively promoting land reform in Latin America.

Finally, while the actual politicians and political groups had more clout in establishing American pressure in favor of land tenure reform in Latin America, it is important to note that average American citizens also had views on land reform that could influence the government position. While this would later be shown by enrollment in programs such as the Peace Corps, it becomes readily apparent through documents such as “A Project to Establish a Hemispheric Council for Social Progress.” In this short document penned by private U.S. citizens, the authors argue in favor of allowing the common people across the American continents form Social Progress Committees that could assist in socially developing Latin American countries through aid from the United States. These groups could coordinate through a “Hemispheric Council for Social Progress” which would allow Americans to travel to Latin America and aid in programs such as assisting peasants and land workers with recommendations with respect to land reform programs.²¹ But why should private citizens care about the land tenure structure in Latin America? The average citizen of the United States in the early 1960’s had no explicit reason to care about the intricacies of a land redistribution program in the district of Tolima, Colombia. John D. Montgomery argues that the myth of the American small freeholders is still pervasive as

²⁰ Edward C. Keefer et al., eds., “Report From the Representative to the United Nations (Stevenson) to President Kennedy,” FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1961–1963 VOLUME XII, AMERICAN REPUBLICS, June 27, 1961.

²¹ “A Project to Establish a Hemispheric Council for Social Progress,” n.d., Richard N. Goodwin Personal Papers, Box 001, Folder 10, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

an element of the American Dream and directly influences popular opinion towards favoring land reform, even in countries outside of the United States.²² While many Americans were more preoccupied with domestic issues than land tenure in Colombia, there were at least some private American citizens who sympathized with land reform efforts.

Though there was a serious push within the United States to promote land reform abroad, some did not view an American attempt to force land reform on Latin American countries as a positive and would have preferred land reform to emerge organically from within. Perhaps the single greatest barrier was the difficulty of upsetting the entrenched traditions of large land holdings in Latin America. As *The Economist* noted in April 1961, “In most of the Latin American republics it is easier, more agreeable and politically safer to compose blueprints for assembling or even producing a domestic motor car than to come to grips with the obstinate problems of an old-fashioned and inefficient land tenure system.”²³ Although the problems of an inefficient land tenure system where large tracts could lie fallow simply because the owner does not have the man power to work were well known in Latin America, the simple fact that previous land tenure changes had favored the large landholders for close to 400 years brought a great resistance to any different course. As Teodoro Moscoso wrote in a letter to Richard Goodwin, “What is the possibility that the government elite, even when offered the incentive of twenty billion dollars will co-operate in making basic reforms, or can be made to co-operate by means of democratic processes?”²⁴ Washington officials often had a stereotype of the Latin American

²² Montgomery, “United States Advocacy of International Land Reform,” in *International Dimensions of Land Reform*, 127-131.

²³ “Latin American Future,” *The Economist*, April 22, 1961, Teodoro Moscoso Personal Papers, Box 008, Folder 012, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

²⁴ “Letter from Teodoro Moscoso to Richard Goodwin, Alliance for Progress with Whom?,” October 15, 1961, Richard N. Goodwin Personal Papers, Box 001, Folder 8, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

strongman who would resist reforms, but in reality it was the oligarchical upper class that often put up the strongest resistance. As former Senator William Benton was quoted as saying, even an offer as large as \$20 billion might not sway the upper classes of Latin America. The possibility of such a large amount of aid amounting to nothing would cause American politicians to consider not sending foreign aid to these countries or encouraging land reform to avoid a fruitless investment. In addition to the impracticality of convincing the Latin American elites as to the necessity of land reform, some opponents of advocating land reform argued that the reputation of the United States might be tarnished by supporting “Communist confiscations”²⁵ Although any US-sponsored land reforms enacted in Latin America would necessarily be less extreme than the complete restructuring seen in Communist Cuba, businesses might accuse the United States of appearing soft on Communism if it encouraged any sort of land expropriation. This alone could dissuade many American politicians from demanding reforms, but there were many other roadblocks as well.

Adding to the obstacles presented by the Colombian landholders, American landholders presented an additional hurdle to those who favored direct intervention in Latin American politics to establish land reform. Assistant Secretary of State Bowles writes, “Although only part of those investments can be applied to land... some American financial interests are convinced that they would be seriously affected by a law which would do away with large land holdings.”²⁶ The stated goal of land reform was to colonize new lands, distribute public lands for private entrepreneurial farming, and redistribute underutilized lands on the large latifundia, some of which were owned by American multinational corporations such as United Fruit Company.

²⁵ “Letter from Teodoro Moscoso to Richard Goodwin, Alliance for Progress with Whom?,” October 15, 1961

²⁶ The New Dimensions of Peace

United Fruit Company had a long history in Colombia, including sponsoring a deadly massacre of striking banana workers in the department of Magdalena in 1929.²⁷ Additionally, when land reform had threatened American financial interests in Guatemala some 5 years earlier, many major companies, particularly United Fruit, had successfully lobbied for direct military intervention, signaling heavy resistance to the idea. Although United Fruit actually did sign on to a policy statement encouraging land reform in general, it is not difficult to imagine that they would resist any law that would expropriate their land in particular. The interests of American companies definitely would have tempered some of the more extreme arguments in favor of equitable land reform, especially in light of other developments across Latin America

The events transpiring in Castro's Cuba are also essential for any understanding of whether United States policy towards Latin American land reform would pursue a hands-off approach or more direct promotion and restructuring. With the triumph of the revolution on January 1, 1959, Cuba sent a definitive statement defying American imperialism in the region. Shortly after, in May 1959, Agrarian Reform Law 17 initiated the expropriation of private farm land. It was right around this time when Senators and presidential candidates Kennedy and Humphrey both began touting new programs of friendship with Latin America. With the nationalization of all foreign holdings in the country in August 1960, the Castro government became for the American government an example of what could go wrong in a Latin American nation if agrarian reform was avoided for too long. This provided an impetus for all government actors to consider endorsing land reform as a solution to the societal ill, either through sheer economic growth or and increased sense of fairness and equality. However, as mentioned in

²⁷ Marcelo Bucheli, *Bananas and Business: The United Fruit Company in Colombia, 1899-2000* (New York City: New York University Press, 2005).

Taffet's *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy*, the catastrophic failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 forced American leaders to give Latin America some self-determination, in order to avoid associating the Alliance for Progress with an attempt to reassert imperial dominance. By allowing the Latin American nations to promote their own agenda, or at least pretend to, Kennedy and his administration could find a middle ground with the staunchly nationalist Latin American governments who were riding a wave of rising expectations and prove that the United States understood that the Bay of Pigs was an "aberrant mistake."²⁸ Only through promoting the Alliance for Progress as a true Alliance could the United States erase some of the deeply entrenched suspicions of American aspirations in Latin America. In promoting a partnership, however, the United States would lose the ability to advocate land reform in any forceful way. Deference to Latin American nationalism thus reduced the scope of action for the U.S.

Jack Behrman, an economics scholar who would eventually become Assistant Secretary of Commerce for International Affairs under Kennedy, wrote perhaps the best summation of the hands-off approach to establishing land reform in Latin America through the Alliance. As he provides such an exemplary view of what would become the United States' official position, it is worth examining his arguments in some depth. In a sprawling policy paper regarding what he believed to be the ideal stance for the United States to take regarding Latin American land reform, Behrman initially expressed many doubts regarding actively pursuing land tenure reform. Behrman wrote, "The problems which are giving rise to dissatisfaction among those supporting Castro are long-range ones, and efforts to swamp the problem with "impact" aid in areas such as housing, land reform, education, etc., are likely to lead to disappointment because

²⁸ Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy*, 30.

of the short-fall of aid in meeting the extensive needs in these areas”²⁹ Perhaps the largest fault Behrman sees in advocating land reform in Latin America and, by extension, Colombia, is the futility of the task due to the enormity of the problem. After centuries of sprawling latifundia and barely workable minifundia throughout the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies, a few billion dollars of “impact aid” would barely change the status quo. Without a truly astronomical sum of money, which the American tax payers would almost certainly never agree to, the land tenure problems that plagued Latin America and led to the Cuban Revolution would simply continue unabated. Furthermore, Behrman argues, merely encouraging land reform in these countries could have unforeseen consequences. Behrman wrote,

There are few well-conceived programs in Latin America as to how to use the Bogota funds- such as in the promotion of land reform- and haste in their use may be self-defeating. Further urging by the United States that land reform is necessary throughout Latin America can lead to greater social unrest, if the reforms are not quickly forthcoming. Yet quick reforms are likely to be ill-conceived and lead to a reduction of agricultural production and productivity. While some reform in land ownership is no doubt needed in many countries, the precise methods of doing so are important and should not be disregarded in the haste to “do something to stop Castro.” Continued pressure from the U.S. for reforms which will come only slowly through parliaments dominated by the large land-holders can well lead to the very political revolution that we are attempting to prevent.³⁰

By vocally advocating land reform as part of a regional economic development plan, Behrman claimed, Washington risked dooming its own efforts by raising expectations too high. The very nature of reasonable land reform made speed and simplicity impossible. To insist that land reform will quickly and miraculously change Latin America would not benefit the United States. In fact, further exhortations for land reform could actually lead to the communist revolution that

²⁹ Jack N. Behrman, “Proposal on U.S. Policies toward Latin American Economic Development,” December 1, 1960, Jack N. Behrman Personal Papers, Box 001, Folder 19, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

³⁰ Behrman, “Proposal on U.S. Policies toward Latin American Economic Development,” December 1, 1960

these reforms were ostensibly aimed to prevent since, as covered before, the Parliaments of Latin America were controlled by the intractable upper class.

Taken together, these criticisms seem like a strong argument against pushing for land reform in Latin America. Yet Behrman ends his policy recommendation by favoring land reform advocacy, although in a more subtle way. Behrman writes, “Our approach must, therefore, be to support wholeheartedly programs which the countries themselves are willing to implement and to point the direction for further improvement without doing it so publicly that we feed the founts of discontent.”³¹ In essence, Behrman recommends that the United States support those countries that engage in a program of long term land reform, but not demand land reform too publicly, lest revolutionaries take that idea to heart. He acknowledges that in order to stave off discontent, land reform must be enacted, but it must be supported without fanfare. Behrman even concedes that direct action may be necessary, as “in some countries, mere changes in land ownership will be a stabilizing influence, for what the people now insist [on] is ownership, not necessarily higher standards of living”³² A synthesis, therefore, would be necessary to both allow for national self determination to encourage Latin Americans and allow for nudges in the right direction through U.S. loans specifically earmarked for land reform.

From the positions of the various American actors, we can begin to construct what would come to be the official U.S. position on Latin American land reform. While the vast majority of American politicians and theorists favored the United States applying pressure on the Latin American republics to enact some form of land reform, there were dissenters who questioned the wisdom of trying to enact this policy on a grand scale. Policy planners such as Hirschman,

³¹ Behrman, “Proposal on U.S. Policies toward Latin American Economic Development,” December 1, 1960

³² Behrman, “Proposal on U.S. Policies toward Latin American Economic Development,” December 1, 1960

Schlesinger, Kennedy, Rostow and to a limited extent Bowles all favored active United States efforts to enact land reform to increase efficiency and equity in Latin America. Tempered by the Congressional actors and other outside forces who supported a hands-off approach, however, as well as the fear of being seen as an imperial power reasserting itself in the region, the United States would make some public calls for land reform at Punta del Este and in various declarations of intent but there were very few outright demands for the reform. Encouraging burgeoning national programs became significantly more important. In order to receive Alliance for Progress funds, for example, national programs of land reform were required to be at least in the development stage. It is important to note, however, that the U.S. targeted its discussion towards the upper class of Latin America, not those who stood to benefit from agrarian reform. By advocating a top-down approach to land reform in such national programs, the United States gave the campesinos of the regions much less political power than if they had supported initiatives from below. All in all, the United States acknowledged that there were many problems with demanding land reform outright, and was content to limit itself to supporting national programs exclusively.

III. Colombia

In Colombia, the U.S. decision on land reform in Latin America would have consequences. Like many of its predecessors, Colombian Law 135 proposed a method of dealing with the stark inequality and inefficiency of the Colombian agricultural sector. Rural Colombia was characterized by a coexistence of minifundios and latifundios, incredibly small farms often inhabited by the extreme poor alongside expansive tracts which dominated the countryside. According to one American survey on behalf of the Colombian Minister of Agriculture, in 1960 approximately 56% of total farms controlled less than 5 hectares, an area so compact that it

might not count as a full economic unit, and owned an aggregate area of approximately 4% of agricultural land. On the other end of the spectrum, 0.5% of farms representing the grand latifundios of 500 or more hectares possessed 31% of the total available agricultural land.³³ Though the inequality of the situation is evident, its inefficiency is a little more difficult to see outright. In 1960, barely one-fourth of the total area of Colombia was being used for agriculture, meaning millions of hectares were left fallow or uncolonized. This statistic makes evident that full and effective use was certainly not achieved on government owned lands or privately held lands. Though the statistics describe a Colombia which was neither perfectly efficient nor perfectly equitable, there was a great divide between those seeking to enact national land reform and those who were strongly opposed. The moderate branch of the splintered Conservative party of the National Front, the Ospinistas or Unionists, represented the key players in the land tenure reform debate, as their alliance with the Liberal party was ultimately what allowed Law 135 to pass the Colombian congress.

As the first president of the post-Pinilla era of Colombian history, Alberto Lleras Camargo staked his reputation and, by proxy, that of the entire National Front on the passage of Law 135. The consummate politician, Lleras Camargo realized that in early 1960, peasant rumblings, local political realities, and international opinion had all aligned in such a way to create the perfect atmosphere for a Colombian land reform bill. Domestically, the political gains of the leftist Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal and news reports suggesting a possible continuation of the Violencia frightened Colombian politicians of all denominations into

³³ Denny, Horne, and Miles, *A Colonization and Land Utilization Program for Colombia*

supporting limited land reform.³⁴ Referring to his experience with the Alliance for Progress, Lleras Camargo wrote that it was this exact feeling of “danger and alarm prevailing at that time,” that was necessary to initiate developmental reforms in Colombia and Latin America as a whole.³⁵ Lleras Camargo sensed a dual opportunity to bring stability to the countryside while bringing many of the angry peasants into the Liberal fold by enacting what can be construed as a retributory attack on the upper class.

As a former General Secretary of the Organization of American States, President Lleras Camargo also perceived the shift in hemispheric attitudes towards land reform and its increasing international acceptance. He understood the significance of U.S. approval of the Act of Bogota and “Operation Pan America” and own promotion of land reform across Latin America.³⁶ President Lleras Camargo wrote that the fact that the U.S. had announced to the world that they would support Latin American programs of land reform in both the Act of Bogota and at Punta del Este was proof enough that the U.S. actually cared about the subject.³⁷ If the United States did not actually believe that countries in Latin America needed land reform, it would have been much simpler to say nothing and offer no financial aid. In Colombia, this financial aid did become a serious consideration for all those involved in the creation of Law 135 due to the portrayal of the nature of the Alliance for Progress funds by the media and American officials. Lleras Camargo writes, “Often the Alliance was presented by U.S. officials, and by its Congress and its press in the nature of an ultimatum to the countries of the south: either there must be

³⁴ Albert O. Hirschman, *Journeys Toward Progress: Studies of Economic Policy-Making in Latin America* (New York City: Twentieth Century Fund, Inc., 1963). 142.

³⁵ Alberto Lleras Camargo, “Report on the Alliance for Progress by Alberto Lleras,” June 1963, Teodoro Moscoso Personal Papers, Box 002, Folder 012, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

³⁶ Duff, *Agrarian Reform in Colombia*, 25.

³⁷ Lleras Camargo, “Report on the Alliance for Progress by Alberto Lleras,” June 1963

...agrarian reform... or there would be no financial aid.”³⁸ To politicians such as Lleras Camargo who sought loans for balance of payment issues, public works, or other Alliance for Progress goals, it seemed Colombia would be forced to enact Law 135. Although this probably gave some ammunition to reactionaries who wanted to assert their own influence, for the majority of politicians, financial aid dollars would be very helpful to their country and their districts in particular.

Besides the United States, however, one other international group had enormous sway over both President Lleras Camargo and the general populace of Colombia. The Catholic Church and its doctrines held and still hold a great significance in the politics of a nation that to this day identifies as 90% Roman Catholic. Although historically an ally of the Conservative party in Colombia, by 1955, the Catholic Church in Latin America began to make public calls in favor of land reform institutes across the two continents.³⁹ Indeed when it came time to form the National Agrarian Council, it was essential that the Church have representation.⁴⁰ When the Council published their findings and revealed their support for land tenure reform and expropriation, it could be seen as the Church giving its assent to the Liberal view. The Church supported land reform in Latin America based on alleviation of poverty and fighting international communism which helped give the Liberal argument of economic development social support.⁴¹ Although this specific example came from 1965, exhortations such as those

³⁸ Lleras Camargo, “Report on the Alliance for Progress by Alberto Lleras,” June 1963

³⁹ New York Times “LAND INSTITUTES URGED ON LATINS; Catholic Leaders Propose Agrarian Reform at Rural Congress in Panama” April 24, 1955

⁴⁰ Hirschman, *Journeys Toward Progress: Studies of Economic Policy-Making in Latin America*, 143.

⁴¹ Duff, *Agrarian Reform in Colombia*, Chapter 8.

made by Hugo Jordan indicate a Catholic Church using the strong language of class conflict to encourage Latin American Catholics to demand changes in land tenure.⁴²

For the Liberal Party, the existence of inefficiencies in the Colombian agricultural sector mandated a comprehensive reform law. As the doctrinaire Conservatives of the National Front and the more leftist MRL refused to send representation to the National Agrarian Council which drafted the eventual bill in 1960, the text of Law 135 closely followed Liberal goals. In other words, without extensive debate or the need for bipartisan concessions, the Liberal party's ideal bill was undiluted. This is mainly due to the tireless work of the "indefatigable" Senator Lleras Restrepo who headed the Council and led its discussion by submitting the working papers.⁴³ The resulting document showcased the essence of what would become Law 135, increasing agricultural productivity. Economic equality, though valuable and often used to justify the reforms in moral terms, was seen as a secondary goal that could be brought about through the first. Although equality is frequently brought up as a guiding factor, and is even enshrined in the Constitution, the Liberal party sought to limit expropriations as much as possible as seen by the hierarchy involved in expropriating lands.⁴⁴ In order to expropriate lands under Law 135, first the government would have to exhaust any reasonable Colombian government-owned land. This would be followed by sales negotiations in which the seller tried to negotiate to a reasonable sales price. If no sales price could be agreed upon, an expropriation could finally occur, but first on unused privately owned land, then underutilized land, and then finally the government could

⁴² Hugo Jordan, "Agrarian Reform in Latin America," in *Social Revolution in the New Latin America* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides Publishers, 1965). 122.

⁴³ Hirschman, *Journeys Toward Progress: Studies of Economic Policy-Making in Latin America*, 143

⁴⁴ Albero Aguilera Camacho, *Derecho Agrario Colombiano* (Bogota, Colombia: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1962). 31.

expropriate fully improved and utilized land for peasants.⁴⁵ Even then, there are more restrictions on what percentage of the land was available for expropriation and how the payment could be made making the whole process extremely difficult. At the end, however, according to the pro-land reform slogan engineered by Lleras Restrepo, “Quien puede mas, puede menos.” In terms of land expropriation, this slogan reflected the idea that since the Constitution allowed for expropriation without pay for eminent domain cases, the Government offering any type of payment, whether bonds or cash, was certainly constitutional.

Though the doctrinaire Liberals had allies in the United States and Catholic Church, the forces in opposition to Law 135 presented a serious stumbling block for enacting land reform. In opposition to the mainstream Liberal party, the Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal, or MRL served as a key detractor of Law 135 in the Colombian Congress. Although the MRL was the more radical congressional party on the Liberal side of Colombian politics, its leader Alfonso Lopez Michelsen rallied his party against Law 135, perhaps hoping to draw some of the more radical members of the mainstream liberal party across party lines. As one of the more controversial aspects of agrarian reform, many Liberal politicians, including MRL members, went out of their way to justify the use of expropriation as part of the Colombian agrarian reform. In an essay on the Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal’s efforts in the Law 135 creation process, Lopez Michelsen used the opportunity to explain his party’s continued support for the powerful measure. In order to assuage American concerns over arbitrary expropriations, Lopez Michelsen discussed how due process was met through the use of a quorum to decide whether

⁴⁵ Carlos Lleras Restrepo, “Estructura de La Reforma Agraria,” in *Tierra: 10 Ensayos Sobre La Reforma Agraria En Colombia* (Bogota, Colombia: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1961). 64-66.

payment can be given in bonds or must be in currency⁴⁶. Although Michelsen believed that this was a fair measure of due process, he did not necessarily believe in the price that Colombia was paying for the expropriated lands. The MRL argued that the state should pay no more than 60-70% of the present value of production as compensation for the land.⁴⁷ One of the major concerns of leftist politicians regarding the use of expropriation was that large landholders could earn more by having their land expropriated than it was worth on the open market. As the more radical branch of liberals, the MRL would have preferred to intensify the expropriations to ensure a true agrarian revolution took place. However, since they did not yet comprise a uniform voting bloc like the doctrinaire Liberals or Conservatives, some MRL politicians voted in favor of Law 135, simply in order to achieve some type of land reform.

Many politicians from the Laureanista, or doctrinaire, Conservative faction remained adamant in their rejection of Law 135 up until its signing. As the son and heir-apparent of former Conservative president and party ideologue Laureano Gomez, Senator Alvaro Gomez Hurtado challenged the land reform bill of the Liberal party for being too centralized to react to specific local challenges. For Gomez Hurtado, establishing a single institute to direct all reform efforts across the districts amounted to over-centralization by a government that was trying to avoid taking responsibility for the harm their actions would bring. The Conservatives alleged that by using an institute rather than the systems already in place, the Liberals were simply trying to score political points, knowing the eventual damages would be blamed on the Institute and not

⁴⁶ Alfonso Lopez Michelsen, "Hacia Una Verdadera Reforma Que Complete La 'Revolucion En Marcha,'" in *Tierra: 10 Ensayos Sobre La Reforma Agraria En Colombia* (Bogota, Colombia: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1961). 93-94.

⁴⁷ Lopez Michelsen. "Hacia Una Verdadera Reforma Que Complete La 'Revolucion En Marcha'" 99.

the government itself⁴⁸. In addition to the pre-existing bureaucracy of the National Front causing issues of implementation, Hurtado and many other Laureanista senators argued that creating one single institute for agrarian reform would mean the regional issues that affect each district uniquely would go unheeded. Instead, regional corporations should be tasked with enacting limited land reforms according to the needs of that specific region.⁴⁹ Regional corporations would be ideal for the Conservative party as they had much greater power in those areas which actually needed land reform. Thus, regional corporations would allow the Conservative party to exert their influence over the land reform process. Hurtado also had a strong belief that since the Constitution was split on the idea of compensation and seizure of land, the government strictly had to pay for land in cash as opposed to treasury-issued bonds.⁵⁰ This was a significant point of contention between the doctrinaire Conservatives and the National Front coalition due to the volatile nature of Colombia's inflation rate. Although Hurtado saw the land reform proposed in Law 135 as a Liberal mistake, he did believe that some form of reform was necessary to correct the inefficiencies of the Colombian agricultural sector.

Another Laureanista senator and former Minister of Agriculture who did not support almost any form of land reform was Gilberto Arango Londoño. Although he did include some discussion on issues of implementation and bureaucracy similar to those put forward by his colleague, Londoño primarily attacked the assumptions made by the liberal party as to the results from a national program of land reform. Heavily basing his discussion of agrarian reform on the platform of efficiency, Londoño wrote that the consequences of redistribution of land would

⁴⁸ Alvaro Gomez Hurtado, "El Autentico Contenido de Una Reforma Agraria," in *Tierra: 10 Ensayos Sobre La Reforma Agraria En Colombia* (Bogota, Colombia: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1961). 171-172.

⁴⁹ Gomez Hurtado. "El Autentico Contenido De Una Reforma Agraria." 179-180.

⁵⁰ Duff, *Agrarian Reform in Colombia*, 114.

bring about further inefficiencies in the Colombian economy. For example, the unused, forested lands which would be parceled and distributed to poor were often intentionally fallow as, according to Londoño, they were unsuitable for crops⁵¹. If these lands were distributed to the campesinos according to the Liberal recommended size for a basic landholding, the family would have much difficulty trying to achieve the same levels of output as the fertile lands in the nearby latifundios. Londoño and other Laureanistas worried that this would cause inefficiency, not simply in crop yield, but also in that the reduced crop yield would result in higher prices for these small farm goods, which would be unable to compete in the national market with the relatively cheap latifundio crops. This would then require government funding to further prop up these small farms because Law 135 amounted to a promise of well-being to the campesinos that simply cannot be kept, according to Londoño.⁵² Finally, some Laureanistas such as ex-Minister of Agriculture Londoño believed that a third inefficiency would arise as Colombia tried to further industrialize and economically develop in the near future. By forcefully placing these campesinos on farming land they are obligated to take care of, they become unable to work in the burgeoning industrial and urban sectors, two sectors which according to contemporary development economists needed to develop to promote economic growth⁵³. The Laureanista arguments provided by Londoño and Hurtado show that there was precious little room for negotiation in between the strict Conservatives and Liberals.

Surprising allies with the Conservatives in the fight against Law 135 were the Socialist and Communist movements of Colombia. Whereas the Conservatives mainly argued that

⁵¹ Gilberto Arango Londoño, "El Verdadero Problema de Tierras En Colombia," in *Tierra: 10 Ensayos Sobre La Reforma Agraria En Colombia* (Bogotá, Colombia: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1961). 208-209.

⁵² Arango Londoño. "El Verdadero Problema De Tierras En Colombia." 214-217.

⁵³ Arango Londoño. "El Verdadero Problema De Tierras En Colombia." 215.

expropriation, compensation in bonds, and a unified institute for agrarian reform were steps too far, the burgeoning Communist movement of Colombia argued that Law 135 merely represented a stopgap by the bourgeois to try and forestall an upcoming Maoist/Leninist revolution. As a communist university professor, Diego Montaña Cuellar wrote that the triumph of the revolutionaries in Cuba had scared the capitalists in the United States into action to try and prevent the universal “campesino fight for the earth.”⁵⁴ The main left opposition to Law 135 was that expropriation should not be the final option for giving land to the campesinos, after all others have been exhausted. If expropriation and payment comes only as an absolute last resort, for a communist who is much more concerned with equality than efficiency, the law simply represents a continuation of the semi-feudal power structure and offers no substantial change to the status quo.⁵⁵ Instead of desiring minor reforms which protect the bourgeois and upper-class farmers, the communist party seems to believe that it is better to wait for the Chinese/Bolshevik/Cuban style uprising. Although the communist/socialist party and the Laureanista Conservatives seem to make an odd couple, perhaps the strangest argument against a full agrarian revolution came from the development economist Lauchlin Currie.

Charged by President Lleras Camargo with finding a method of improving the Colombian economy, the former U.S. citizen Lauchlin Currie argued against substantial land reform in favor of an entirely different project. According to Currie’s Operation Colombia, “Agrarian reform is essential... but it will not solve the issue of the grand majority of Colombian

⁵⁴ Diego Montana Cuellar, “La Via Capitalista Y La Via Socialista Para La Reforma Agraria,” in *Tierra: 10 Ensayos Sobre La Reforma Agraria En Colombia* (Bogota, Colombia: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1961). 268.

⁵⁵ Montaña Cuellar. “La via Capitalista Y La via Socialista Para La Reforma Agraria.” 284.

campesinos.”⁵⁶ Currie suggested that although land reform was necessary, it should not be the only focus and need not be done through expropriations. Instead, Operation Colombia proposed a program of cheap housing and expanded social services in the major cities of Colombia to encourage urbanization and industrialization, two key factors Currie suggested might increase income per capita. With the rapid movement of human capital to the cities, the need to address minifundios would no longer be as strong. This view, although widely cited and strong enough to slow down the voting process on land tenure reform, was criticized by others as an “Alliance for Regress” which failed to account for the social effects of displacement and the simple impracticality of such an enormous task.⁵⁷

Another faction which obviously opposed Law 135 was the Sociedad de Agricultores Colombianos, which represented the large landholders in Colombian society. As the owners of the latifundios, the SAC members had the most to lose from an overzealous program of land expropriation. The SAC therefore vocal criticized almost any attempt by the Colombian government to enact land tenure reform. Regarding any delay as worthwhile since revolutionary zeal could potentially burn out, the SAC used tactics to intentionally force debate and stall the progression of land reform. For example, in 1959, when a land tax bill was under consideration in the Colombian Congress, the large latifundists introduced a variation of the land classification system that would use two distinct classification groups to obfuscate the process and dissuade any attempts to actually improve taxation.⁵⁸ In addition to stall tactics, one of the SAC’s most utilized weapons was the op-ed article. Referring to the work ethic of the Colombian campesino,

⁵⁶ Lauchlin Currie, “La Operacion Colombia,” in *Tierra: 10 Ensayos Sobre La Reforma Agraria En Colombia* (Bogota, Colombia: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1961).255.

⁵⁷ Ernest Feder, “Operation Colombia or The Alliance for Regress,” 1962.

⁵⁸ Hirschman, *Journeys Toward Progress: Studies of Economic Policy-Making in Latin America*, 132.

one such op-ed wrote, “The agricultural workers are content. They work only during the harvest and then leave. They don’t like steady work.”⁵⁹ Eager to show that the campesinos did not have the drive to maintain the lands they would be given by expropriation, the SAC agriculturists penned article after article espousing the laziness and ineptitude of the Colombian peasant. With very few outlets to rationally discuss the issue given the gradual disappearance of peasant unions and the appearance of the National Front’s paternalistic Acción Communal to dissuade gatherings, the peasants rarely had the chance to explain their situation.⁶⁰

The passage of Law 135, therefore, hinged on the moderate Ospinista branch of the Conservative party, which might have some crossover with the centrist Liberal philosophy. Shadows of doubt were cast on the likelihood of ratification when on June 7, 1961, Senator Alfonso Uribe Misas wrote a scathing twenty point program deriding the unconstitutionality and communistic elements of Law 135. Uribe Misas wrote that he could not support the new land reform act “for not being a remedy against the communism that menaces the country and being, to the contrary, the road that opens the country to this devastating sect so that it may perturb the natural right of property.”⁶¹ With his dissent, Uribe Misas revealed that the Ospinista branch of the Conservative party was not a single voting bloc.

Yet the majority of the Ospinista voting bloc maintained their fragile alliance with the doctrinaire Liberals and allowed Law 135 to be implemented in Colombia. In the face of the lobbying SAC, the silenced peasantry, the vocal Laureanistas, socialists, communists, alternative options and traitors from within the party lines, the Ospinistas still voted in favor of Law 135 to

⁵⁹ El Tiempo. March 10, 1959, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Leon Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1986), 37-28.

⁶¹ Alfonso Uribe Misas, “Un Grave Peligro,” in *Tierra: 10 Ensayos Sobre La Reforma Agraria En Colombia* (Bogota, Colombia: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1961). 247-50.

give it the simple majority it needed to pass the Senate. Why? Of course, they still faced the pressure of the Catholic Church, but that alone cannot explain the Ospinistas defiance of the doctrinaire Conservative platform. Certainly the pressure placed by the United States galvanized the Liberal-Ospinista axis to the point where Enrique Peñalosa, Director of INCORA from 1961-1968, stated that he significantly doubted that Law 135 of 1961 would have passed without the Alliance for Progress.⁶² However, by the time serious courting of Colombian politicians began in earnest beyond simple international statements most of the work of passing Law 135 had been done. Even Hubert Humphrey's speech in Bogotá, a direct endorsement of Colombian policy on land reform, proved to be ultimately little more than a nice gesture which hardly changed the political landscape.⁶³ Instead, the real reason for the alliance between the two moderate Colombian parties is that the Ospinistas needed to support the first president of the National Front to maintain order and prevent a resurgence of the Violencia. As Zamosc writes in his seminal work on the Colombian peasantry, the initial agrarian reform of Law 135 of 1961 was mainly a political tool to restore "harmony among the classes" that could act as a "social palliative."⁶⁴ Not only would agrarian reform give the semblance of being revenge for the peasantry, it would also serve as another essential boost for both the Liberals and Ospinistas. Following years of civil strife, agrarian reform represented a grand achievement of the newly minted National Front which was suffering from growing disillusionment of the Colombian people.⁶⁵ Additionally, the Liberals were able to trade support for the Ospinista candidate in the

⁶² Irwin Baskind, Enrique Lerda, and Theodore Mesmer, *The Alliance for Progress in Chile and Colombia : Some Latin American Perceptions* (Washington D.C.: Friends of the Alliance for Progress, 2008). 204.

⁶³ Duff, *Agrarian Reform in Colombia*, 58.

⁶⁴ Leon Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia*. 35.

⁶⁵ Hirschman, *Journeys Toward Progress: Studies of Economic Policy-Making in Latin America*,

upcoming Conservative presidency for support on agrarian reform.⁶⁶ These social concerns far outweigh the pressure put on the Ospinistas by the United States.

IV. Land Reform Revisited (1968)

To view the repercussions of land reform, I close with a short discussion of the state of Colombian-American relations and the early results of land reform in 1968. This is an ideal moment to examine the lasting effects of Law 135 because 1968 was the year where land reform reentered the political conversation in a meaningful way under the Lleras Restrepo administration. Per the alternation agreement of the National Front, Lleras Camargo's presidency (1958-62) was followed by that of Ospinista Conservative Guillermo León Valencia (1962-66) and then by a liberal president in 1966. That Liberal would be Carlos Lleras Restrepo, cousin of Lleras Camargo and leader of the Liberal party. As part of his Transformación Nacional, Lleras Restrepo attempted to sharpen the teeth of INCORA and allow the Institute to assert itself by expropriating land, one of its primary functions. In addition to renewing land expropriation efforts which had stagnated under Valencia, Restrepo also signed Law 1 of 1968 which dealt with tenant and sharecropper rights. The fact that this new thrust of land reform legislation would necessarily muddle the results of Law 135 makes 1968 an ideal time to revisit the agrarian situation.

The simple fact that land reform in Colombia needed to be reinvigorated demonstrates that, whatever the grand rhetoric surrounding Law 135, ultimately it had not achieved its goals. According to a U.S. report on Alliance for Progress in Colombia, as of June 1967, approximately 45,000 hectares of land had been expropriated and 96,000 hectares had been purchased by

⁶⁶Hirschman, *Journeys Toward Progress: Studies of Economic Policy-Making in Latin America*, 158.

INCORA.⁶⁷ While certainly welcomed by the beneficiaries, this relatively small amount of land is dwarfed by the nearly 2,000,000 hectares of new land that was colonized. This newly arable land would help ease some of the crowding in the areas of heavy minifundios, but did not address at all the existing problems of latifundia in the most fertile lands. Zamosc writes that INCORA did not target lands dominated by latifundia because President Valencia tended to use the Institute as a “fire fighter” for regions that saw increased peasant radicalization.⁶⁸ Generally, these lands were not one and the same as the peasants tended to resort to violence in areas of minifundia but received plots in areas of new colonization. In the face of other major economic crises such as the devaluation of the Colombian peso and variable coffee prices affecting the balance of payments, Valencia did not actively seek to expand INCORA’s duties beyond immediate stabilization of the discontented rural areas. The Ospinista President Valencia shows that though the Ospinistas were crucial in the alliance that passed Law 135 of 1961 through the Colombian Congress, they did not seriously care to enact meaningful changes in land tenure. Whether the Ospinistas maintained the National Front coalition to gain political favors or to stabilize the country under the new government, they did not have any desire for land reform to accomplish more than peasant pacification.

Valencia’s Liberal successor, Carlos Lleras Restrepo, would promote land reform more aggressively perhaps owing to his work in the creation of Law 135 of 1961. Central to Lleras Restrepo’s plan to revitalize the stalled efforts of agrarian reform were the campesinos that were not well represented in policy discussions before the 1961 law. Within a few days of becoming president in 1966, Lleras Restrepo had already received two different policy plans that the

⁶⁷ “Survey of the Alliance for Progress- Colombia: A Case History of U.S. Aid.” Committee on Foreign Relations, February 1, 1969. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pcaac189.pdf. 787.

⁶⁸ Leon Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia*. 36.

government could enact which would directly engage the peasantry in the land reform process. These plans led to the formation of a new organization, the Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos with Restrepo's Presidential Decree 755 in May of 1967.⁶⁹ ANUC extended its membership to all who worked the land in an attempt to bring popular participation to land reform and politics in general. There were peasant associations before the ANUC such as the National Agrarian Federation of Colombia (FANAL) which organized the various peasant unions in Colombia, and Acción Comunal which organized community projects in the countryside under the National Front. Restrepo believed that FANAL was too closely connected with the Conservative Party and the Church, while Acción Comunal had become just another method for maintaining the clientelist nature of the Colombian agriculture. By creating a peasant organization that could exert real strength, Colombia would finally be achieving the Alliance for Progress goal of bringing greater democracy to Latin America. Therefore a new organization would be necessary which the National Front could still control to avoid radicalization. The fact that it took until 1968 for the government to bring enhanced peasant participation into land reform shows that Law 135 of 1961 was a top-down reform that was dominated by those who had the most to lose. This could explain the failure of Law 135 to enact a substantial change in the land tenure patterns of Colombia.

In between the signing of Law 135 and 1968, the rural violence that had plagued Colombia during the Violencia of the 1940s and 50s began once again in the form of guerrilla groups such as the ELN and the FARC. Though passions had temporarily calmed in the countryside with the establishment of the National Front, these groups along with M-19 saw a resurgence once it was clear that government organized land reform would not be forthcoming.

⁶⁹ Leon Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia*. 36.

One of the most interesting figures of this period was the revolutionary Catholic priest Camillo Torres who radicalized after returning from seminary in Europe and died fighting as a guerilla in the Colombian countryside. At first, Torres was not exceptionally radical with regards to land reform, stating in 1960 that though the landholding class might resist, agrarian reform would have to expropriate land that was productive or could be returned to being productive.⁷⁰ Essentially, Torres had similar views as an average member of the MRL or socialist parties. By 1965, however, Torres began espousing expropriations without compensation and return of indigenous lands.⁷¹ Torres also warned of the dangers of Colombia allying itself with the United States which he saw as an imperialist power that only wanted control. The U.S. had spent millions of dollars in loans and revolutionaries such as Torres were still able to exploit the fears of the peasantry to gain political power in some treatises such as his “Message to the Peasants”.⁷² However, Torres and the ELN also appealed to the aspirations for a more equitable future and the frustrations of a peasantry which had not seen the promised benefits of Law 135 of 1961. This shows a definite failure of American-supported land reform to win the hearts and minds of the Colombian campesino. Instead of being seen as a fresh, new direction, some poor farmers still believed the lack of tangible results and continued U.S. interventions meant nothing had changed. The Colombian government also had negative views on Torres, since his insurrection showed a failure of land reform to staunch the flow of peasant violence. For this reason Camillo Torres represents a failure of both U.S. and Colombian policy. Though he died in 1966, only a

⁷⁰ Camillo Torres, “On Land Reform,” in *Revolutionary Priest: The Complete Writings and Messages of Camillo Torres*, ed. John Gerassi (New York City: Vintage Books, 1971). 95.

⁷¹ Camillo Torres, “Platform of the United Front of the Colombian People,” in *Revolutionary Priest: The Complete Writings and Messages of Camillo Torres*, ed. John Gerassi (New York City: Vintage Books, 1971). 307-308.

⁷² Camillo Torres, “Message to the Peasants,” in *Revolutionary Priest: The Complete Writings and Messages of Camillo Torres*, ed. John Gerassi (New York City: Vintage Books, 1971).

year after the foundation of the ELN, Torres had a lasting effect on the peasant violence which would continue through to the 21st century.

In addition to the ELN, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) also showed a discontentment with the post Law 135 of 1961 status quo. The FARC was a continuation of the tradition which began with radical Liberal guerrilla soldiers during La Violencia. According to Rochlin, the primary catalyst for the formation of these groups among the peasantry was the failure of the more leftist Liberals to bring about meaningful land reform. These proto-FARC groups subsequently called for “equitable redistribution of land... and for breaking the yoke of imperialist domination.”⁷³ Historians generally accept 1964 as the year where the modern FARC came into being, two years after the passage of Law 135 of 1961 and five years after the Cuban Revolution showed that a large-scale peasant-based revolution was possible in Latin America. Disgruntled with the slow progression of land reform, some peasants took action and reignited the guerilla conflict that had been dormant since the fall of the Rojas Pinilla dictatorship and the rise of the National Front. Again, this marks a failure of Colombian politicians as successfully implemented land reform might have staunched some of the revolutionary fervor which led to the decades-long war against the FARC.

Not all post-Law 135 actors were clamoring for implementation of further land reform. Having successfully dodged a major bullet in Law 135, members of the SAC once again fought against Lleras Restrepo’s renewed attempts in 1967-68. Terrified by the campesinos and sharecroppers demanding land rights based off Law 1 of 1968, the SAC began submitting document after document to the government to protect itself from what they called land

⁷³ James F. Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries in Latin America: Peru, Colombia, Mexico* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2003). 96-97.

invasions of adequately cultivated lands.⁷⁴ The SAC does acknowledge Law 135 of 1961 in documents such as this, and even go as far as to use it as a shield against the Restrepo era reforms. Their argument says that if Law 135 of 1961 was enacted, then this new expropriation of land cannot be valid since a law requiring payment already existed. If the landholding class is using the law that targeted their properties as a defense, it must not be effective. The reluctance and resistance of SAC members to forfeit any land even after two individual land reform bills marks yet another failure of the Colombian land reform movement.

In the United States, these continued discussions of land reform fell mostly upon deaf ears. When discussing the Alliance for Progress and specifically the election of Lleras Restrepo, President Johnson asked “if we really want to blow that much on Colombia.”⁷⁵ With the Great Society programs and further military commitment to Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson had much greater issues to deal with than less than satisfactory performance on land reform goals in Colombia. At the same time, the Colombian-American relationship was in decline, as evidenced by Lleras Restrepo balking at U.S. demands for a speedier currency devaluation and his criticism of America’s Vietnam policy.⁷⁶ Lleras Restrepo did not have the international background that his cousin had cultivated during his time at the OAS and therefore had less patience for the United States attempting to force itself into Colombian politics. Indeed, across the region, popular support for the United States and the Alliance for Progress was dwindling due to a lack of results and, perhaps more importantly, a loss of credibility by the United States. With coups in the Dominican Republic in 1961 and Brazil in 1964, assassination attempts on

⁷⁴ Carlos Jose Gonzalez M., “La Concentracion Parcelaria de Jamundi Declaracion de Los Gremios Agrarios,” in *Debate Agrario Documentos*, ed. Ernesto Rojas Morales, 1971. 10-13.

⁷⁵ Jeffery F. Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy*, 168.

⁷⁶ Jeffery F. Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy*, 169-172.

Fidel Castro in Cuba, and a military landing of marines in the Dominican Republic in 1965, the Alliance for Progress lost a great deal of credibility as a community of equals. To some Latin Americans, after the continued covert action in the region, the Alliance was simply American imperialism by another name. By the middle of the 1960s, foreign aid programs were falling out of favor in the general American population as well, as Vietnam grew significantly in importance. Propping a government and waging a war in South Vietnam, and it became near impossible to justify continuing financial support to Latin America. A balance-of-payments crisis would also occur under the Johnson Administration, further weakening foreign aid during a time of war. What attention was paid to Latin America would fade even more with the presidential election of 1968. Richard Nixon would begin a program that “focused on trade rather than aid.”⁷⁷ With the notable exception of Chile, as the decade progressed, the United States no longer paid attention to land reform efforts across the continent, as bigger issues and a sense of failure had already doomed the Alliance for Progress.

Conclusions

The example of land reform in Colombia presents an interesting case-study in the nature of top-down reform movements. Law 135 of 1961 was conceived in the upper echelons of the Colombian political hierarchy, the same group that would be directly impacted by a significant land redistribution program. This created a serious conflict of interest, especially in those groups such as the Ospinista Conservatives who were not enthused by the idea of land redistribution and had supported the measure only as a social palliative. The presidency of Valencia and the SAC using Law 135 of 1961 as a shield against squatters proves that members of the upper class never

⁷⁷ Jeffery F. Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy*, 185.

expected for a land reform bill to be anything more than symbolic of the unity of the National Front. The example of Colombia shows that for a social revolution to be successful, support must come from the actual beneficiaries of the changes. Top down reform movements such as Law 135 of 1961 rely on the magnanimity of the upper class and without the proper pressure from the lower class, that magnanimity does not last very long. The rural violence that reasserted itself in Colombia in the mid-1960s and brought land reform swiftly back into the national conversation shows that it is the lower class that must provide the impetus for sweeping social revolutions such as extensive land reform.

At the same time, the example of Law 135 of 1961 also illuminates some aspects of the relationship between Latin America and the United States. American pressure as relayed through the Alliance for Progress certainly played a significant part in the passage of Colombian land reform. However, the United States desires were not the only factor at play. Law 135 was already being debated before the announcement of the Alliance for Progress and the bill was signed before any funds were disbursed to Colombia. In those debates, U.S. loans and the Alliance for Progress certainly came as a clear endorsement for the National Front and for Law 135 of 1961. However, the ultimate responsibility for the passage of the bill relied on the Ospinista contingent of the National Front coalition. The defection of Senator Uribe Misas from the Ospinista ranks reveals that land reform was far from a done deal, even with the support of the United States. This process shows that even though the United States held influence over Latin America through the Alliance for Progress, ultimately the success or failure of reforms lay at the feet of local politics. The U.S. could not explicitly command an outcome, even with control over the funds. Although land reform ultimately did pass in Colombia, it showed that the

United States could only nudge the country towards its desired end goal and rely on local politics to finish the deal.

Law 135 of 1961 marked a potential high-water mark for land reform efforts across Latin America. American influence helped cement the bonds between the nascent National Front coalition of centrist Liberals and Ospinistas which allowed the passage of reform acts within Colombia. Although the alliance between the two political parties held and Law 135 of 1961 passed, the reluctance of the Ospinista president Valencia to use land reform as a preemptive vaccine as opposed to a temporary bandage on the countryside greatly reduced the successes of the land reform bill. With American attention focused on Vietnam and domestic issues, nothing significant could be accomplished until 1968 and Lleras Restrepo's return to land reform. Ultimately, though agrarian reform had the power to bring together minds such as Rostow and Behrman with giants of agriculture such as the SAC or United Fruit, it did not have the power to bring about top-down agrarian reform in Colombia.

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